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International briefing 9: Training and development in the United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT This article explores the training and development strategies and practices of large business organisations in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The survey reveals that Emirati companies are very aware of best training and development practice as implemented in their foreign counterparts, and that they generally adopt similar methods and strategies. The article considers the influence of national culture, religion, government policies, education and the economic environment upon the training and development strategies and practices of companies in the UAE. It is argued that despite the negative effects of a dwindling oil sector, the UAE's companies are well placed to maintain their current regional success and that they will soon be playing an increasingly important role in international trade, thus significantly contributing to the continuing economic growth of the country.

Keywords: Training, human resource development, United Arab Emirates, emiratisation, Arab culture, religion (Islam)

Introduction

Despite the fact that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has one of the largest and most diversified economies in the Gulf region, there exists in the literature virtually no data or research findings relating to the training and development strategies and practices of Emirati companies. The aim of this article is to fill this gap in the literature by providing some basic data about various training and development issues that might be of use to researchers wanting to do comparative work or further research in the UAE. The author attempts to explain the findings of the survey by investigating various elements of the national context such as the national culture, religion, government policy, education and the economic environment. It is intended that the survey results and the subsequent explanations and elaboration will be of use and interest both to researchers and training/development professionals taking up their first position in the UAE, or to the human resource managers within multinational organisations.

Basic facts about the UAE

The UAE lies on the south-eastern side of the Arabian Gulf occupying some 83,600 square kilometres in the east of the Arabian peninsula. It shares borders with Qatar to the north-west, with Saudi Arabia to the west and south, and with Oman to the east and north-east. The UAE was established in 1971 and is a federation of seven emirates formerly known as the Trucial States. The name "Trucial States" derived from a Perpetual Treaty of Maritime Truce signed by their rulers and the British in the 1850s which was primarily designed to keep peace at sea, especially during the pearling season. The agreements between the rulers of the emirates and Britain were unique, as Britain undertook responsibility for their foreign affairs and external defence, while agreeing not to intervene in their internal affairs. Disputes and differences between the rulers of the different emirates were not uncommon. Britain never treated the Trucial States like its other colonies; it did nothing to aid the economic development of the country and it was eventually Britain that decided to terminate its agreements with the Trucial States in 1971. The rulers of the emirates, recognising that there was more uniting than dividing them, agreed to establish a federal state, and thus the UAE was born.

The growth of the UAE has been phenomenal. Thirty years ago, only a handful of tarmac roads existed and the high-rise building was virtually unknown, yet emirates such as Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah are now sprawling urban areas whose skylines are dominated by impressive, modern, high-rise buildings. Thirty years ago, only those in the major towns had access to education or medical services. In 1971, the population of the UAE was slightly over 180,000 and only 46 nationals had a university degree (Kirkwood, 1995), most of which were gained in the United States, Britain and other Arab countries, as the UAE didn't have its own university until 1977. In 1980, over half of men over the age of 45 were illiterate, and over three-quarters of women. Illiteracy is now virtually unknown among the young.

In the early 1900s, fishing and pearling were the major occupations of the population. It was the export of pearls that paid for most of the country's imports, but by the late 1930s the pearl trade slumped and never recovered. Able-bodied men left the more densely populated areas along the coast to find work elsewhere, while inland, a number of nomadic tribes maintained their simple lives on a diet of dates and camel milk. The discovery of oil a few years later, and its production from 1962, was the catalyst for the UAE's development into one of the world's wealthiest countries, with per capita GDP being US\$17,810 in 1997 (Business Monitor International, 1998).

It has been fortunate for the people of the UAE that the main priorities of its rulers have been the preservation of political stability, economic development and the provision of social welfare. Hospitals, schools, reliable electricity and water supply, desalination plants and a modern road network were early priorities of the rulers. UAE nationals currently receive free health care, free education, free utilities and numerous subsidies, such as for housing. Abu Dhabi and Dubai, as the two wealthiest emirates, pay for the federal budget and

subsidise the five other emirates (Kirkwood, 1995). The oil income of Dubai is about one-sixth of Abu Dhabi's however, and this is reflected in the size of their respective contributions.

Demographics

The Ministry of Planning has estimated that the UAE's population is currently approximately three million, and of this less than a quarter are UAE nationals (Business Monitor International, 1998). The Indian immigrant community is the largest at 450,000, followed by Pakistanis (350,000), Bangladeshis (150,000), Sri Lankans (100,000) and Filipinos (90,000). The largest European country of origin is the UK, with 30,000 expatriates. The majority of expatriate workers are men, and hence males account for over two-thirds of both the working population and the total population. Expatriates do virtually all manual and technical jobs, and while the government is keen to reduce its reliance on foreign workers, it knows that UAE nationals will not do these jobs.

As many UAE nationals as possible are absorbed into the public sector, but this cannot now take any more, so the government is keen for nationals to take up employment in the private sector. There is a glaring mismatch, however, between the needs and requirements of employers in the private sector and the expectations of UAE nationals; the employers find that job applicants typically lack experience, skills, motivation and appropriate qualifications, while the applicants complain that the salaries are too low and the working hours too long. This may explain why the percentage of national labour in the private sector was estimated at only 1% in 1995 (Al Roumi, 1999).

Economy and workforce

The UAE owes its great wealth to the production of oil and gas. Abu Dhabi holds the world's third largest oil reserves and at the current rates of extraction they should last to the end of this century. In contrast, a recent government report suggested that Dubai's reserves may run out as early as 2010, although many believe that 2020 is a more realistic date. Developing a non-oil sector has rightly been one of the main objectives of Dubai's rulers, and by 1997 oil accounted for only 20% of Dubai's GDP; it was 50% for Abu Dhabi, and 31% for the UAE as a whole (Siddiqi, 1998). After Saudi Arabia, the UAE now has the most diversified and vibrant economy in the Gulf region. Dubai has developed itself into a region for manufacturing, re-export, banking, financial services, tourism, retailing and distribution. Within a few years tourism will account for 20% of Dubai's GDP. A number of free trade zones throughout the UAE have been very successful in attracting foreign investment by offering zero taxation, no exchange controls, a 4% tariff and the minimum of regulation.

The UAE's economy is still highly sensitive to the price of oil, and so the decrease in oil prices since the early 1990s led to a slowdown in the rate of growth in the rest of the economy. The UAE has run a budget deficit for several

years, except for a surplus in 1996, which was the result of windfall oil revenues (Business Monitor International, 1998).

The labour force is approximately 1.3 million, and of these nearly 90% are expatriates. The participation of UAE nationals in the labour force is 54%. The figure for female participation in the labour force is 19%, while for men the figure is 72% (Abed et al, 1996). The rising unemployment rate of young people, increasingly educated, is becoming a problem in the UAE as in the other Gulf countries. The vast majority of UAE nationals are employed in the public sector where they receive considerably higher salaries and work considerably fewer hours than their counterparts in the private sector.

Public policy and strategy

Due to the UAE's rapid development since the 1970s and the shortage of qualified national labour, it has been necessary to rely heavily on expatriate labour. Now, with slower rates of growth and rising graduate unemployment among nationals, it has become one of the country's main priorities to secure employment for nationals. The demographic structure of the UAE makes the situation more critical, as over one quarter of the population is aged under 15. Some reports estimate that the labour market must absorb 10,000 nationals annually (Al Roumi, 1999). The government's policy of replacing expatriate workers with UAE nationals is known as "emiratisation", but to date it is only banks that have been forced to each year increase the number of nationals they employ.

Many nationals come to the labour market with no work experience, a poor standard of written English, unsatisfactory I.T. skills and an inappropriate qualification. In 1998, 72% of those graduating from the UAE University held arts degrees. However, the Higher Colleges of Technology, established in 1988 to offer vocational and technical programmes, have developed a reputation for turning out high quality graduates who possess the knowledge and skills needed in industry. Nevertheless, employers still need to devote significant time and resources to the training and induction of national recruits. Large employers often offer language and I.T. courses to further develop national employees. Emiratisation will remain a key element of the UAE's public policy for the foreseeable future, but in a business environment based on cheap expatriate labour and cost minimisation, most private sector firms are not willing to train unskilled and inexperienced nationals and then pay them considerably more than the rates paid to foreign workers. The government is aware that if it introduces new legislation to force employers to do this, many would leave the country.

Research methodology

The survey was designed to discover the training and development policies and strategies of larger organisations in the UAE. As the UAE is a small country, it was assumed that the practices implemented in one of the larger emirates

would apply in the others also and, in any case, most of the country's larger companies operate nationwide in all of the emirates. The Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry published a book in 1998 called "The Top Companies in Dubai" and this gives details of the top 100 companies in Dubai. The criteria used for inclusion in the book include capital value, labour, market value, quality, excellence in their field, and those companies that contributed significantly to local economic development.

A questionnaire with 60 mainly list or category questions, but also some with a Likert rating scale, was used to gain information about both organisational policies and strategies, and also about the attitudes and opinions of human resource and training professionals on a range of training, development and educational issues. The questions covered topics such as organisational structure, investment in training and development, methods of training and development used, the selection of individuals for training and development, the content and purpose of training programmes, the use of competencies, attitudes to higher education, and the evaluation of training programmes. A separate two-page answer sheet was provided that only required ticks to indicate the answers. However, a space was provided for each question for the respondent to provide additional information or comments. Virtually every respondent made use of this space, mostly giving relevant and interesting additional information. The survey participants were requested to return the answer sheets by either fax or post. The majority replied by fax.

The questionnaire was sent to the "Head of Human Resource Development" at ninety-nine companies (one company from Dubai's Top 100 could not be traced). One reminder was sent to those who had not replied within three weeks. Responses were received from twenty-two organisations, giving a response rate of just over 22 per cent. A number of organisations wrote or telephoned to say that they could not participate in the survey because of confidentiality issues. Business owners in the UAE are generally very secretive about their organisations and they do not like employees giving out information about their business, especially specific facts and figures.

Respondents

Of the twenty-two respondents, four were conglomerates, four were in oil-related industries, seven were trading companies, six were in service industries (including three in financial services), two were manufacturers, and one organisation classified itself as "other". Two of the organisations operate in two different industrial sectors. The organisations were of all sizes in terms of number of employees: seven have over 2000, four have over 500 and five have less than 200. All survey returns came from the head office, or the country or regional head office, of each company. The questionnaires were returned anonymously although several respondents signed their name and position or added a compliments slip. Of these respondents, the job titles given included Human Resource Manager, Regional Training Manager and Head of Human Resource Development or HRD Manager.

Corporate policies and strategies

UAE companies trade nationally, regionally across the Gulf countries, and increasingly internationally. Their business strategy typically focuses on cost minimisation and the use of cheap foreign labour, which possesses the highest level of skills and technical knowledge. This strategy has allowed companies in the UAE to remain competitive in the global economy. UAE companies do, however, seem very aware of best training and development practice as implemented in their foreign counterparts and they generally adopt similar methods and strategies. The vast majority of training and development professionals are expatriates, mainly from Europe and South Asia, but they also come from countries as far apart as Australia, the United States and Sudan, the latter being an Arabic speaking country.

Many organisations in the UAE expanded very rapidly and little attention has often been paid to organisational design. It is not unusual to find positions such as "Manager of Finance and Human Resources", even among quite large organisations. 64 per cent of survey companies have a director of human resources, and 73 per cent said that they have a formal training and development strategy that complements the wider corporate strategy and business plans. All respondents reported that their owner and/or senior management are either very interested and committed, or moderately interested and committed, to training and development in their organisation. 68 per cent of organisations have a training manager and 73 per cent have their own training centre.

The percentage of human resource managers that have a place on the board of directors is a good indicator of the extent to which organisations value and recognise the contribution of the human resource function to their success. The UAE's figure of 64 per cent compares very favourably with the UK (47%), Switzerland (58%), The Netherlands (44%), Denmark (53%) and Italy (18%) (Brewster and Bourniois, 1993). Of course, it cannot be assumed that having a place on the board allows human resource managers to influence either business or training strategy, or that it gives them powers of decision making. As a great proportion of the UAE's companies are owned by individuals, it is more likely that these individuals make the major strategic and operational decisions. The figure of 73 per cent for the proportion of UAE companies that have a formal training and development strategy, presumably written, also compares very well with European countries. Only Denmark, Norway and Sweden have a figure over 60 per cent (Price Waterhouse Cranfield Project, 1991).

All organisations have had to observe the government's desire to increase the process of emiratization. The government has been particularly keen to get nationals placed in the banking sector, and the cabinet issued a ministerial decision that from January 1999 every bank is to increase the number of nationals on their payroll by 4% each year. Even before this requirement, the percentage of nationals employed in UAE banks had reached 12%. However,

this ministerial decision has encouraged banks to not only recruit nationals, but also to train and develop them.

The emiratisation policy has, at times, led to tension in the workplace as expatriates, often graduates themselves with many years experience, see fresh UAE national graduates with no experience take up positions senior to them on significantly higher salaries. The business culture in the UAE is such that expatriate workers do not complain about such things; they either put up with the situation or they leave, either to a new employer where they will probably face the same situation, or to return to their home country.

In a speech to the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce in November 1977, the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs emphasised the need to focus on developing the private sector and workplace skills through education and training. Such thinking has improved the links between employers and educational institutions. For example, Dubai Polytechnic, the educational institution of the Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry, has signed a Minute of Understanding with the Ministry of Labour which outlines the various ways in which the Polytechnic will further the process of emiratisation in the private sector. These include the establishment of a career advisory service for nationals and the provision of training courses subsidized for employers by the labour department (Medhat, 1998; Weston, 1998).

Education

The main government institutions of higher education are the United Arab Emirates University, which was established in 1977 in Al Ain and which has now produced over 20,000 graduates, the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) which were set up in 1988 to offer vocational and technical programmes, and which are now located at several locations throughout the UAE (with separate male and female campuses), and the new Zayed University which has campuses in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and which currently only admits female students. In addition, there are a number of private universities and institutions of higher education. Dubai Polytechnic, for example, is a quasi-government institution, receiving the bulk of its subsidy from the Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

All survey participants recruit graduates, with 68 per cent regularly employing UAE nationals from the Higher Colleges of Technology, 50 per cent taking graduates from the UAE University, and 64 per cent recruiting graduates from overseas. While 32 per cent of organisations said that over three-quarters of their graduate recruits are UAE nationals, 50 per cent reported that nationals account for less than a quarter of their graduate recruits. Although 68 per cent of companies reported that less than a quarter of their senior managers hold an MBA or master's degree, 91 per cent do have employees currently enrolled on an MBA or another university-based programme. Of these, 20 per cent are wholly funded by the organisation, 35 per cent are partially funded by the organisation, and the remainder of candidates are self-funded. 40 per cent of employers will only support senior managers for an MBA or university-based programme, while figures for middle and junior managers are 30 per cent and

15 per cent respectively. 10 per cent of companies reported that they only offer financial support for MBA or university-based study to UAE nationals. 75 per cent of companies said that they expected MBA and university-based programmes to develop the individual, while 63 per cent wanted to give the employee exposure to leading edge ideas and information. It is clear that in line with the general Arab culture of respecting and encouraging education and learning, businesses in the UAE value and support the MBA, and it is not uncommon to find employees at all levels holding this qualification. One retailer of electrical appliances reported that virtually all of its branch managers hold an MBA (most of whom are Indian nationals), while a company in the travel and transport sector reported that in one head office department nearly half of the secretaries and administrative workers have an MBA or are working towards one.

The government is committed to free education for all nationals. Education accounts for 20% of the federal budget and, with defence, was one of only two sectors to receive more money in 1999 than the year before (Allen, 1999). In 1995 there were over 600 government schools and nearly 400 private schools, with both sexes being able to complete their secondary education. Even the smallest desert or mountain village now has its own school for younger children, making the country's primary school enrolment rate virtually 100% (Business Monitor International, 1998). Government-financed education extends beyond schooling. In the early years of the UAE's existence, government scholarships were provided to study at universities in other parts of the Arab world, or in countries such as the United States and Britain. The UAE now has a range of universities and institutions of higher education of its own, and so the overseas scholarship programme remains mainly for higher degrees. It is a feature of the UAE's education system that female students are the most numerous (more than half of the UAE University's students are female, and the Zayed University is currently for females only), the most hard-working and the most successful, but many do not enter the labour market, either because of the lack of suitable vacancies or because their parents or families forbid them to work.

Training and development in practice

Training expenditure

The training budget of the survey companies, as a percentage of total payroll costs, varied greatly. 22 per cent spend less than 0.5 per cent of payroll, 22 per cent between 0.5 and 1 per cent of payroll, 17 per cent over 2.5 per cent of payroll, while only one company spends more than 3 per cent. This compares to an average of 2.5 per cent in the UK in 1995 (Tregaskis and Brewster, 1998). 18 per cent of UK companies spend over 4 per cent of their wage bill on training, which is lower than France (32%), Sweden (25%) and the Netherlands (19%), but higher than Germany (16%), Switzerland (11%) and Italy (9%) (Brewster and Bournois, 1993). Horwitz (1998) argues, however, that the majority of organisations in most countries spend less than 2 per cent of their payroll on training. In France, where the figure is considerably higher, there exists legislation that requires organisations to spend on training, and failure to

do so results in increased taxation. Similar schemes have been considered in the UAE but they are unlikely to be introduced in the foreseeable future.

Holden and Livian (1993) observed, however, that many personnel managers don't know how much their organisation spends on training. Costing training accurately is difficult, but a lack of information on training expenditure must surely have implications for the effective implementation of training and development. In countries such as the UK, Germany, Sweden and Denmark over a quarter of organisations didn't know exactly how much they were spending on training (Holden and Livian, 1993). In the UAE, 18 per cent of the organisations were unable, or unwilling, to state the size of their training budget as a percentage of total payroll costs. It is likely that some of the respondents that did submit a figure did not calculate it exactly. However, all UAE companies reported that their training budget would either increase or stay the same in the next financial year. The trend in Western Europe has also been that organisations are generally increasing their expenditure on training and development (Larsen, 1994).

Amount and type of training

The proportion of an organisation's employees that receive some type of formal training or development activity in any year was spread evenly; one third of companies gave training to less than a quarter of their employees, one third gave training to between a quarter and a half of their employees, and the remaining third gave training to over half of their employees. The use of in-company training programmes is the most popular method of training, with 91 per cent of companies using them. 64 per cent use external providers, mainly private training institutions. 59 per cent send employees to seminars and conferences, and 32 per cent use open or distance learning.

Of the companies that have a training centre, 50 per cent of them deliver more than half of their organisation's training and development activity. 38 per cent have six or more full time staff. While no companies deliver training only in the Arabic language, 41 per cent use only English, 50 per cent use Arabic and English, and 9 per cent use several different languages. This finding confirms the importance of the English language to organisations in the UAE. In fact, 52 per cent of organisations deliver training to improve employee language or communication skills.

The language of business in the UAE is English, while Arabic is the national language. This potentially puts UAE nationals at a disadvantage in their own country when it comes to entering the labour market. Even though most teaching in higher education is done in the English language, many nationals leave the school system with unsatisfactory ability in English, especially in writing. While UAE nationals are required to work with the English language, so that the UAE can take up its role in the global economy, there is a real danger that this might be at the expense of losing a part of their national identity. This may have undesirable consequences in the future, like the social unrest seen in countries such as Bahrain.

86 per cent of organisations deliver job-specific training programmes, 67 per cent deliver general management programmes, and 95 per cent deliver programmes that focus on skills development. All organisations agreed that a main purpose of their training and development activity is to improve work performance, and 59 per cent mentioned that they particularly target the training and development of UAE nationals. 86 per cent of organisations reported having a formal process for evaluating in-company training programmes, but this dropped to 59 per cent for the evaluation of externally provided training. A survey by the Cranfield Network on European Human Resource Management found that 81 per cent of organisations in the UK carry out some type of formal training evaluation (Tregaskis and Brewster, 1998). While the proportion of companies formally evaluating training immediately on completion ranges from 71 per cent in Norway to 90 per cent in Switzerland, follow-up evaluation some months after the training was completed ranges from 35 per cent in Switzerland to 64 per cent in the UK (Holden and Livian, 1993). The vast majority of companies both in the UAE and in Western Europe make use of informal feedback from both employees and line management (Larsen, 1994).

62 per cent of UAE companies expect their use of in-company programmes to increase in the next 1-2 years, while 10 per cent think their use will decrease. 86 per cent of UAE companies use competencies for training and, of these, 85 per cent use organisation-specific and organisation-devised standards. Nine per cent of companies (two organisations) use the British National Vocational Qualification (NVQ). 65 per cent of survey respondents agreed that the UAE needs a system of competence-based vocational qualifications, and some thought that the NVQ could provide the starting point for development of such a system.

Training needs analysis and performance appraisal

82 per cent of UAE companies have a formal process for assessing their employees' training needs. This compares to a figure of 80 per cent in the UK and 85 per cent in France, but the figure is lower in most other West European countries (Holden and Livian, 1993). Both UAE and European organisations use a similar range of methods for ascertaining training needs, including analysis of business plans, training audits, performance appraisal, requests by line management and requests from the employee. Accurate, sufficient and timely information on training needs is essential if organisations are to ensure that the training they deliver to their employees actually contributes to the achievement of their business objectives.

64 per cent of organisations record their employees' personal training and development plans in writing. 81 per cent have a formal staff appraisal system that is currently well implemented, while 19 per cent admit to having a staff appraisal system, which, in practice, is only variably implemented. Evaluation of the performance of employees is as important as the evaluation of individual training events, and together they can be used to support the concept of a learning organisation that is striving for excellence.

Influences on training and development strategy and practice

National culture

In an article on how to manage across cultures, Elashmawi (2000) advises that Arabs are interested in a person's contacts, education and position in society. They value both authority and personal relationships, and they often base their decisions on intuition and religious beliefs. The UAE national culture seems to comply with the Arab culture described by so many writers (Dakhil, 1988; Terpstra and David, 1991; Abdalla and Al Hamoud, 1995; Al Bahar et al, 1996; Agnaia, 1997).

Arab culture plays a major role in shaping organisational structure and decision making within Emirati organisations. The UAE's private sector is dominated by a number of large family controlled conglomerates, which typically have a range of interests that may include manufacturing, construction, trading, retailing, property, distribution and financial services. The whole business tends to be controlled by one man, the founding owner, who often adopts an autocratic management style. Some owners try to implement a consultative or participative style, but they find it difficult to relinquish power and usually maintain their grip on the important decision-making. Many of these businesses are poorly managed by western standards and cost minimisation tends to be the overriding business objective, above excellence and quality. This has had a significant affect on training and development in the country.

The owners of businesses are usually heavily influenced by the national culture, which itself is heavily influenced by religion. The family is the strongest social unit in the Arab world. Family loyalty and paternalism pervade all aspects of life, both at home and at work. The recruitment of managers is often based on kinship relationships and tribal ties rather than on experience, ability or qualifications. Such influences also affect the individuals selected for training and development.

The most senior managers in large private sector organisations tend to be UAE nationals, but they often act as figure-heads with the day-to-day operations left to be managed by expatriates. The social values of the Arab typically include honour, self-respect, generosity and hospitality. Education is admired and most parents are strongly committed to the education of their children. It is common for children not to be given a managerial position in the family business until they return from the United States or Britain with an MBA.

Work ethic

UAE nationals do not possess a work ethic as recognised in the west. They generally expect to do jobs that have some status, that are well paid and which do not demand long working hours. The government openly acknowledges that nationals are reluctant and unwilling to do manual or low-status jobs and despite increasing levels of unemployment as yet they have no plans to encourage or force nationals to take up such employment. The wealth of many families and the generous welfare state have undoubtedly acted as a disincentive for many young people to either get an education or enter the labour market. Those who are prepared to work are usually only interested in

the public sector, where pay is generally higher and working hours lower. The only area of the private sector that attracts UAE nationals in any significant number is banking and financial services. This is widely considered a respectable occupation, although many nationals are prepared to work for Islamic banks only. Some banks give UAE nationals favourable treatment in terms of position or salaries, but many of these employees do not perform their duties satisfactorily, either because of problems with their reliability or because of their lack of ability. It is almost impossible to dismiss a UAE national, and yet turnover of nationals in most private sector businesses tends to be higher than the rate for expatriates.

Religion

Islam is the religion of the UAE. Islam is both a religion and a complete way of life, which affects businesses in many ways. It is the world's second most popular religion, after Christianity, and is the dominant religion in over 30 countries. The five pillars of Islam define the duties of Muslims: the profession of faith, prayer, alms-giving, fasting and the haj (the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during their life). Practising Muslims pray five times a day: at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset and night. Prayer times vary according to the times of sunrise and sunset, and Muslims are "called to prayer" from loudspeakers at the top of mosques. It is not unusual for Muslims to stop whatever they are doing when they hear the call to prayer; a government official may stop processing the documents he is working on and leave his customer waiting for his return from prayer, likewise employees in a training session will also usually expect to stop whatever they are doing.

The majority of Muslims in the UAE are Sunnis, rather than the Shiites found in Iran and Iraq. The Shiites support fundamentalist Muslim principles and reject western patterns of behaviour. The rulers of the UAE have condemned extremism and promoted a philosophy of tolerance, whereby their people have freedom of belief and worship under the country's constitution. Expatriates and visitors to the UAE are expected to respect the beliefs of Muslims however, and they are expected to avoid causing offence by saying or doing anything that goes against Islam.

Ramadan, the annual month of fasting, takes place during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. Working hours are usually shortened during Ramadan, and Muslims do not eat, drink or smoke between sunrise and sunset. Public restaurants and workplace cafeterias are closed between sunrise and sunset. People of other faiths, while not expected to fast, must not eat, drink or smoke in the presence of a Muslim. It is unusual for any significant training or developmental activities to take place during Ramadan and many expatriate training professionals are encouraged to take some of their annual leave during this period.

Islam allows and encourages trade and commerce, but condemns all unearned income, such as usury, gambling, monopolistic trade and "meddling middlemen". It instructs people to take up trades and crafts. At the social level, Islam calls for the strengthening of family ties and instructs Muslims to take care of their kin. Many Muslims believe that their lives are under the control of God

and this leads to great over-use of the term "Inshallah" (God willing). A training manager who asks a group of trainees whether they will be able to meet an assessment deadline will often get the reply "Inshallah"; in other words, if it doesn't get done, then that is God's will. Work attitudes are much more relaxed in the UAE than in western countries and deadlines in all areas of business and education are frequently ignored.

Academic work in the training and development field

Research as an academic discipline is still in its infancy in the UAE. Although a very high proportion of university staff have PhDs, the facilities and working conditions in institutions are such that research output has been minimal. No university is yet accredited to offer PhDs, although some institutions, such as Dubai Polytechnic, offer them in collaboration with overseas universities. The leading universities in the UAE are now keen to encourage research and it is likely that empirical work in the training and development field will be done in the near future. As in neighbouring countries such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait the topics most likely to be covered initially are training to facilitate the increased participation of nationals in the labour market and the influences of culture on training and development.

Sources of information on training and development

No regular and systematic data collection or surveys are undertaken by any organisation or government department in the UAE, so there is an absence of comprehensive and reliable information on training and development in the country. Any data collection done by the government on training and development has almost always been in connection with the process of emiratisation. Occasional surveys have been done or sponsored by various government departments or agencies to assess the training needs of nationals and to identify gaps in provision or to collect data on the education or training already given to nationals. The final reports are often written in the Arabic language and most are not published or made available to the general public.

Training and development practitioners in the UAE sometimes share information through informal networks. The training managers of a number of retail, hotel and other private sector organisations meet fairly regularly as do the personnel managers of the major universities and colleges of higher education. Many of the practitioners are members of the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), and while there is a fair amount of interest in the CIPD among both practitioners and students in higher education, CIPD qualifications are not currently available through any institution in the UAE. Stafford Associates, a private training provider, does, however, offer diplomas and master's degrees in training and development/human resource management accredited by the University of Leicester, UK.

Seven large business organisations in the UAE are currently accredited as centres for the NEBS Management (NEBSM) awarding body (UK) in addition to

educational institutions such as Dubai Polytechnic and a handful of smaller training providers. At present, the employers only offer NEBSM qualifications to their own staff. Most centres offer the Introductory Certificate and the Certificate in Management, one employer and one college (Dubai Polytechnic) offer the Diploma in Management, and one employer offers NVQs in Management. NEBS Management programmes are increasingly being used by companies to provide management development for nationals. Centre staff and NEBSM external verifiers from the entire Middle East region attend a two-day conference and training event held in Dubai annually.

Conclusions

The rapid social and economic development of the UAE, especially during the last two decades, has required business organisations to develop at a pace rarely found in developed countries. This study has shown that Emirati companies are very aware of best training and development practice as implemented in their foreign counterparts, and that they generally adopt similar methods and strategies. Using measurements such as the proportion of organisations with a formal training and development strategy or the proportion which have a Director of Human Resources, training manager or training centre, it can be seen that Emirati companies actually compare very favourably with European countries. Emirati companies do, however, spend less on training than those in most West European countries, but it should be remembered that in some European countries there are legal, political or cultural reasons why expenditure on training might be higher.

The rapid growth of the UAE economy owes much to the vision and policies of its rulers, while the success of the UAE's business organisations owes much to the determination, open-mindedness and progressive attitudes of their owners and management. Furthermore, in a country with a harsh climate and few natural resources other than oil and gas, Emirati companies have demonstrated their skill in exploiting any possible business opportunities. They have been quick to learn from their competitors abroad, and they have tried to emulate their successes by never being slow to adapt or change. It is clear that the UAE's companies are well placed to maintain their current regional success and that they will soon be playing an increasingly important role in international trade, thus significantly contributing to the continuing economic growth of the country.

Dubai, the second largest of the United Arab Emirates, has 40,000 companies registered with the Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry. There is one company for every 25 people. Although this study was based only on Dubai's largest and most successful business organisations, and the sample size was relatively small, the author believes that the results *are* representative of training and development practice as implemented in the UAE's *larger* business organisations and that the results may provide a starting point for further research in the UAE or for comparative work.

Training and development professionals working in the UAE are operating in a unique cultural and economic situation, although the research of others indicates that the UAE does share many aspects of a common Arab culture which emphasizes the importance of religion, family, education and success (Dakhil, 1988; Terpstra and David, 1991; Abdalla and Al Hamoud, 1995; Al Baher et al, 1996; Agnaia, 1997). It is important that training and development professionals fully understand the social and cultural environment in which they are working to avoid causing offence to their colleagues, to comply with all legal requirements, and to maximise the productivity and effectiveness of their workforce.

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